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ABSTRACT

A substantial number of college students in the future will be mature women who are coming back to complete an interrupted education or to get new credentials. These women want their literature courses to say something to them about their own lives and their own problems, and they want to hear about those problems from women writers. In teaching a course in twentieth century feminist literature, there is a great deal of material from which to choose. At the start of the course it is wise to assign a non-fiction work such as Freidan's "The Feminine Mystique" or deCrow's "A Young Woman's Guide to Liberation" to educate the class on the fundamentals of feminism. A chronological approach to the literature helps point up that there is a central theme of American feminist fiction, and it does not really change from 1900 to 1975. Some suggested books for the course are Kate Chopin's "The Awakening," Edith Wharton's "The House of Mirth," Willa Cather's "A Lost Lady," Ellen Glasgow's "Barren Ground," Sue Kaufman's "Diary of a Mad Housewife," Lois Gould's "Such Good Friends," Joan Didion's "Play It As It Lays," Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar," Marge Piercy's "Small Changes," Erica Jong's "Fear of Flying," and Lisa Alther's "Kinflicks." (JF)

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Modern Feminist Fiction:

A Course for Returning Women Students

by

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MODERN FEMINIST FICTION:

A COURSE FOR RETURNING WOMEN STUDENTS

In the past year, two articles in The Chronicle of Higher Education have documented a trend in college enrollments that is important to all of us. They point out that in 1976, while the enrollment of men students declined by 2.1%, the number of women attending college once more increased. Women are now 47% of the total college enrollment. The greatest increase in enrollment for any single group was in that of women from 22 to 35; that group increased by 103%. And there are now 489,000 women over 35 attending college.

Figures like these should speak loudly to both administrators and teachers who are worried about declining college enrollments as the pool of 18-year-olds shrinks each year. Clearly at least half and probably more of the students of the future are going to be women; a substantial number of them will be mature women who are coming back to complete an interrupted education or to get new credentials. Women like these are not going to be willing to take only the traditional English courses, dominated by male writers and male critics, and taught largely by male professors. They want their literature courses to say something to them about their own lives and their own problems, and they want to hear about those problems from women writers, not from men.

These were the kind of women who flocked into my class when, three years ago, I introduced in our department an undergraduate course on twentieth centruy American women writers. At that time, I did not think of making it a course in feminist literature; I chose twentieth century American literature because that is my field of concentration, and I chose women authors because I wanted to rescue many fine women writers from the obscurity to which they have been rel-

egated by the male critics who compile anthologies. But when I reread the work of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow and Willa Cather, I began to realize that recurring feminist themes dominated their books, and I decided to choose contemporary women writers who also dealt with them. Thus I discarded the obvious choices of women writers such as Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers and decided to gamble on less established ones such as Joan Didion, Sylvia Plath, Lois Gould, and Sue Kaufman. I think the gamble has paid off; judging by enrollments and by student evaluations, the course has been immensely successful.

At present I am trying to cover what seems to me to be the best of twentieth century feminist fiction in one 15-week semester, and I am using an approach that is both literary and rhetorical; that is, I am trying to make the students aware of how well the authors use the traditional components of structure, imagery, character development, and so on to make their social statements about women. The course is, after all, primarily a literature course, and I think I must maintain that emphasis if I am to justify it as a legitimate offering in the English department. But that is not difficult, since one certainly has no problems finding appropriate books that are well-written. My annotated bibliography will bear that out. So far my only compromise with the literary nature of the course has been a decision I made after I taught the course for the first time. I decided that in the future I would begin with a non-fiction, feminist book so that I would not have to take class time to educate a very disparate audience on the fundamentals of feminism. I made the change and found that it helped a great deal.

I do not want to take the time here to give you a detailed description of the syllabus I developed for the course or to try to discuss all of the books that one might use in it. I would, however, like to sketch for you the general design of

the course and share with you some of the insights that came to me as I taught it. Then I want to discuss some of the problems one encounters in teaching a course of this kind. I think they are probably unique, and I think some of them are serious.

When you start the course, however, your most immediate problem will be to find common ground with an audience that is going to vary widely in age, and in commitment to a feminist philosophy. I think you can assume some commitment; otherwise they would probably not be in the class. But I think you should not assume that these students--mostly women--are as involved with feminist causes as we are apt to be or that they see the world in the same way. And I, at least, think one should go slow in trying to change mature women who may be coming back to school at real emotional cost and personal risk. But we can say to them, "Here is the way some writers see the problems of women," and let them draw their own conclusions.

There are several non-fiction books of the kind I mentioned earlier that analyze these problems. I have been using Friedan's The Feminine Mystique successfully although it is longer than I'd like, and for that reason I am going to switch to Karen de Crow's A Young Woman's Guide to Liberation next semester. One could also use Carolyn Bird's Born Female, Elizabeth Janeway's Man's World, Woman's Place, or Vern and Bonnie Bullough's The Subordinate Sex. The last is probably the least polemic, de Crow's probably the most. You may decide that it is not necessary to take class time to discuss this introductory book, as it is not literary and its only real function is to give the students a map of the territory they are going to be reading aobut.

In teaching the novels in the course, I have found that a chronological approach works well. One reason is that it helps the students to realize that there is a central theme of American feminist fiction, and it does not really change from 1900 to 1975. Today's books are bawdier and more explicit, and some

of them are even funny, but from Kate Chopin's The Awakening in 1899, to Lisa Alther's Kinflicks in 1975, all the heroines are struggling to resolve the inner conflict between the guilt and anxiety they feel when they don't accept the stereotyped roles that society tries to force them into, and the frustration, discontent, and self-hatred they feel when they do accept those roles. Often the heroines cannot resolve the conflict; and often the books end tragically in suicide, insanity, or bitter resignation to an existence defined and dominated by others. And even in the newer books, there are not many happy endings. But then there never have been many happy endings in serious literature, and these books are serious.

I begin the course with Chopin's The Awakening--even though it means cheating a year on my time-line--because it is so strong and so timeless, and because in many ways Edna Pontellier's behavior foreshadows the patterns that will appear in the other novels. As she begins to emerge from her role of child/wife and petted plaything, she dramatizes her rebellion by taking a lover. She typifies the woman Friedan calls "the sex seeker," the woman whose sense of self-worth depends so much on men's approval that she cannot conceive of real independence from them. But Edna Pontellier's lover only compounds her problems, and Chopin's suggestion that adultery is a poor substitute for autonomy is later echoed by Cather, Jong, Didion, Kaufman, Gould, and Alther.

From The Awakening, I move to Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth, published in 1905. While perhaps not as finely a crafted novel as her The Age of Innocence, published 20 years later, the book is an excellent study of the beautiful woman as sex object and ornament. Both of Wharton's books also underscore the feminists' contention that frequently the worst enemies of women who seek independence are other women who have opted for safety rather than freedom.

Willa Cather's A Lost Lady, is being crowded out of the course because so many

good contemporary novels are coming along that seem to demand inclusion. Nevertheless, this economical and intense novelette is a delight to teach, and makes a good contrast to some of the harsher books in the course. The protagonist, Marion Forrester, is a charming survivor, a man's woman but one who refuses to let male heroics destroy her. Some of the more radical feminists might not approve of her, but she represents one kind of courageous woman.

The last of the early books, Ellen Glasgow's Barren Ground, published in 1925, is one of the mainstays of the course. The heroine, Dorinda Oakley, has a "vein of iron" in her, a tough core of identity and will that enables her to overcome her environment and become a successful businesswoman and a strong, autonomous person. Only Beth, who appears 50 years later in Piercy's Small Changes, approaches her in strength. Yet Glasgow never lets the reader forget what a price a woman pays for independence; at the end Dorinda is alone, and although she has earned the admiration and respect of everyone who knows her, she is bitter because she feels that she has been defrauded of a woman's birthright, romantic love. Glasgow's biographers suggest that the author's ambivalence toward her heroine may have reflected her own mixed feelings about being a successful, but single, woman artist.

One can begin what I think of as the middle part of the course with any of several novels of the late 60's and early 70's that depict women as victims. All of the heroines in these books try to break out of their roles and find an identity independent of their husbands and children, but finally the sexist system and the weight of men in the world is too much for them and they end by accepting what they think they cannot change. The earliest of these books, Sue Kaufman's Diary of a Mad Housewife,was published only two years after The Feminine Mystique, and one can almost see Kaufman developing Friedan's tenets chapter by chapter. Although the writing is pedestrian, the book works and the students see a lot of truth in

it. Shulman's Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen falls into the same category. After a hectic period of trying to be as adventuresome and uninhibited as a man, the heroine Sasha retreats to the dependence and safety of motherhood. In neither book, however, does the author suggest that these women are going to be happy in the security they opt for. Lois Gould's Such Good Friends gives the best picture of the ludicrous depths to which an apparently intelligent, upper-middle-class woman can sink when she allows herself to be intimidated and victimized by her husband.

But in my opinion, by far the most powerful and moving of these woman-as-victim novels is Joan Didion's Play It As It Lays. More than any book I know it dramatizes the ugly and empty life of a woman, who, because she is beautiful, has been conditioned from adolescence to be a sex-object and an appendage to male power figures. Didion shows the tragedy of such women and the moral bankruptcy of the system that produces and exploits them. Ultimately that system, in this case exemplified by the movie industry, destroys the men too because finally they respect nothing human.

For a book to bridge the gap between these essentially negative novels and what I am going to call the new women's books, I choose Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar. Probably we are inclined to think of it as a tragic book too, but in spite of its dark side, it marks a turning point in the literature of women because in it for the first time we see a woman confronting role choices that go beyond wife/mother, sex-object, or spinster. True, it is her agonizing about choices that drives Plath's counterpart in the novel to paralysis and a suicide attempt, but at the end we see her moving toward autonomy. And also, for the first time in a feminist novel, we encounter some untraditional and attractive female role models.

Three large and complex novels, all written in the last five years, make up what I think of as the final group of books for the course. They are Marge Piercy's Small Changes, 1972, Erica Jong's Fear of Flying, 1973, and Lisa Alther's Kinflicks, 1975. Teaching all of them in one course would crowd you, but choosing among them would also be difficult because they are important books that seem to me to have come directly from the woman's movement. Their heroines are energetic, self-aware women who are actively pursuing both liberty and happiness, but who do not retreat to passivity and despair when their search falters. These are positive, if not cheerful, books.

Piercy's Small Changes fills a special need because she creates two strong women characters who do not fit the typical patterns we encounter in the earlier books; rather one is a young working-class wife, and the other is an intellectual, and a career woman with strong maternal and sexual drives. In the course of the book Beth, the timid working-class wife, grows into a strong and self-reliant person while Miriam, the brilliant mathematician, caves in to male pressures. At times Piercy can't resist getting off into feminist preaching, but on the whole the book is well-done and memorable.

Both Fear of Flying and Kinflicks are extravagant and bawdy books, running over with sex and satire. In my opinion, however, they are also important books, the serious but witty first novels of talented women. Both are kind of picaresque novels in which the heroines go through a series of adventures trying to find their identities. That the adventures are sexual is no accident, because in trying out sex with a series of men, the heroines are really trying to find out if they want to find their identity through any of those men. Both decide that they do not, that in fact they cannot because no autonomous person can develop identity through another. That, I think, is a key statement of the women's movement.

I am very conscious of major omissions from this catalog of books for a feminist fiction course, and realize that there are many other books that could and perhaps should be added. Two of my omissions seem to me particularly serious, and I think anyone who is going to teach such a course should think about correcting them.

The first gap is the absence of books by and about black women: However, they are not easy to find, and some of the best ones like Gwendolyn Brooks' Maud Martha and Sula Morrison's Blue Eyes are not available in paper back. But I did some serious looking and reading in the past few months and found at least two excellent novels that I think would fit into the course very well. One is Louise Meriweather's Daddy Was A Number Runner and the other is Ann Petry's The Street; I intend to use the Meriwether book when I teach the course this Spring.

The other category of women's books you may want to include in the course is Lesbian literature. Gay women are a significant force in the women's movement, and some of my students have felt that they should be represented in a course that deals with that movement. Again, I have had trouble finding Lesbian books, in mass market paperbacks, but after considerable looking came up with three: one is the old classic, The Well of Loneliness by Radcliffe Hall; another is Patience and Sarah by Isabel Miller, and the third, and apparently the most popular, is Ruby-fruit Jungle by Rita Mae Brown.

With such an abundance and variety of material to choose from, one has no trouble putting together a course that is both interesting and aesthetically respectable. And for me it has also been personally rewarding. Not only have I learned a great deal and raised my own feminist consciousness, but I believe that I have helped a lot of other women. Many of the women over 21 who are coming back to school may be leaving their doll's houses behind them, but they have not read

much in recent years and have not thought about the complex social pressures that have shaped them. They are not apt to read Greer's The Female Eunuch or Millet's Sexual Politics or even The Feminine Mystique. But when they encounter the ideas of those writers in fictional form, they immediately recognize situations and problems that could come from their own experiences. One result is that they begin to develop a new sense of commonality with other women; another is that they begin to throw off the guilt they have been feeling about not wanting to sacrifice themselves for their families and even about coming back to school. And when together we begin to analyze the web of circumstances that each author creates to show the reasons for her heroine's predicament, they begin to understand more about the events in their own lives. That is a liberating, if sometimes disrupting, experience.

I would be less than honest, however, if I did not at least mention some of the problems that I have encountered in teaching the course. A major one that is still fresh in my mind from last year is the political pressure one may get from militant women in the course. A few women criticized me severely for not choosing more radical books and for not taking advantage of my forum to politicize the more backward members of the audience. Much of the material in the course was old hat to those few, and like Marxists in an economics class, they were impatient with discussions that seemed to them naive. I had warned the class at the beginning that this was a literature course, not a consciousness-raising group--it was both, of course--but the militants never accepted that view.

Another problem is that you are working in a really new field where there is a virtual explosion of creative activity, and you won't have many charts to guide you. The body of feminist criticism is growing rapidly, but most of it is on older works and not very helpful. So you'll have to rely on your own judgments, and inevitably some of them will be wrong. You may also find defending yourself against

the accusation of teaching trash by colleagues who were so diverted by the dirty words in a book like Fear of Flying that they never got around to finding out what Jong is saying. And you may have trouble with such words yourself, and with some of the very explicit descriptions. If you're inhibited, it's not easy to talk about the implications of the fellatio scenes in Such Good Friends.

Finally, you should realize that if you work in a department dominated by traditional and conservative males, you may well face disdain and even contempt for spending your energies on women's literature, particularly contemporary feminist literature. And if you plan to do your scholarship and publishing in that kind of literature, you are taking a calculated risk. As Karen de Crow says, men do not take women's work seriously, and this category may include both your work and that of the authors you are interested in. I think the younger male scholars, even the traditional ones, are beginning to recognize the contribution of women scholars, and I certainly think that many departments will change as women sit on budget councils and move into administrative jobs. But for now you should remember that we're still in the revolution, and you will have to make a decision about whether you want to be on the barricades.